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ASTRONOMY, ETHICS AND THE PLANETS

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ABSTRACT

This paper looks at the astronomical context for morality and ethics. It explores the ways in which astronomy has inspired theories of good and evil. It will argue that astronomy often has a moral component and that the stars and planets have often been seen as inclining humanity to either good or evil acts, or can be used in order to infer standards of human behaviour. It will also be argued that by influencing culture, astronomy requires or encourages action. The codification of morality in relation to astronomy can be traced to Pharaonic Egypt, was developed in the Hellenistic world and reached a full form in the first-century CE in works such as Claudius Ptolemy's *Tetrabiblos*, in which the planets were ascribed personalities. These planetary personalities were embodied in every individual character and could incline people to good or evil depending on the planets' disposition at any one time. The notion of the seven deadly sins – one for each planet – can be traced to this system. The idea is, then, that morality is a dynamic system, moving in space and time as the planets move. While an individual may be inclined to do evil at a particular moment or location in space and time, they might equally be disposed to do good. The system was challenged from a number of perspectives. Hermetic and Gnostic cosmology proposed that, because the entire cosmos was evil, the only solution was to escape from it entirely and the Catholic theologian Thomas Aquinas critiqued the claim that the planets could directly influence moral choice. The paper will conclude with reference to the impact of modern astronomy on morality: the use of Newtonianism to support theories of natural justice and universal human rights, and the application of Einsteinian relativity to the theory of cultural relativism, in which no one culture can claim to be superior to any other.

KEYWORDS: Astronomy, Culture, Morality, Plato, Thomas Aquinas, Isaac Newton, Albert Einstein

1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural applications of astronomy concern every aspect of human affairs, including morality. This paper will consider the relationship between morality and astronomy in one particular strand represented in Platonic, Hermetic and Catholic thought, concluding with some final thoughts about the modern era. The major secondary source on the topic regarding the classical and Medieval West in English is Morton Bloomfield's *The Seven Deadly Sins* (1952), an expansion of his original paper published in the *Harvard Theological Review* (1941). Morton (1952: 16) used the terms 'Soul-Drama', from Reitzenstein and Schaeder (1926) and 'Soul Journey' from Bousset (1901) as a description of the doctrine of the soul's descent and ascent through the planetary spheres. In this scheme, each planet and planetary sphere assumes a moral quality which the soul either acquires (as it descends) or abandons (as it ascends) as it makes its journey through the spheres. As Bloomfield argued, the seven planets then become associated with the seven deadly, or cardinal, sins of Roman Catholicism. As listed in the probably second-century CE 'Testament of Reuben', these were promiscuity, insatiability, strife, flattery and trickery, arrogance, lying and theft (Charlesworth, 1983: 'Testament of Reuben', 3). As it arrived in the Greek world, Bloomfield claimed, the doctrine had possibly originated in the redeemer mystery of Persian Zoroastrianism, but it also included significant Egyptian content. Bearing in mind the likelihood of Indian influences, in view of the proximity and close trading relationships between India and Mesopotamia, and from there to the Mediterranean, it is impossible to trace any single origin.

The Soul-Drama finds its earliest surviving, comprehensive literary treatment in Plato's 'Myth of Er', in which the soul descends to Earth through the planetary spheres (Plato, 1935: X.61b B, 621.B) and reascends after death. Plato did not ascribe any significance to the planets in this process but he did add that when souls are judged the righteous ascend to the sky, the unjust descend to the earth (Plato, 1935: X 614 C-E), anticipating Christian doctrines of a Heaven above and a Hell below. The sky, then, is a moral, or ethical arena. As Mark Williamson stated, discussing modern space ethics, we have to consider 'who is asking [ethical] questions and who is answering them?' (Williamson, 2003): no question is ever asked without a prior context, or a set of assumptions about the way the world works. This paper looks at the astronomical context for morality and ethics.

2. THE CLASSICAL WORLD

In Babylonian teachings the planetary deities can act as judges of human behaviour (Rochberg, 2004), but the planets appear to have been only endowed with inherent moral qualities between the fifth and first centuries BCE. Early indications are present in the Babylonian nativity omens of the late fifth-century which ascribed good or evil fortune to the planets (Sachs, 1962; Rochberg-Halton, 1988):

the child born under Jupiter will have a 'regular (life)...will become rich (and) will grow old.

the child born 'when Venus has come forth', will have a life which is 'exceptionally calm (and) favourable' and marked by longevity.

the child born with Mars may have a hot temper.

the child born when Saturn has come forth will live a life which is 'dark, obscure, sick and constrained'.

It follows that, for example, a child born with a hot temper may be inclined to impulsive, violent and therefore potentially immoral acts. These planetary personalities were evident in a more fully developed form in Claudius Ptolemy's second-century CE *Tetrabiblos* in which it was claimed, for example, that Mars may render people kingly, noble and strong when honourably placed but, when difficult, it is 'rash, unruly, indifferent, stubborn, keen, headstrong contemptuous, tyrannical (and) easily angered' (Ptolemy, 1940: III.13). Ptolemy continued, 'If Venus alone takes dominion of the soul in an honourable position, she makes her subjects pleasant, good, eloquent, neat, cheerful, fond of dancing, eager of beauty' and so on (Ptolemy, 1940: III.13). Each planet might have a positive or negative quality at a child's birth, depending on its zodiacal position and angular relationship with the other planets (including the Sun and Moon), but also had an inherent benefic or malefic disposition. As set out by Ptolemy (Ptolemy, 1940: I.5), the Moon, Venus and Jupiter were benefic, Mars and Saturn malefic and the Sun and Mercury were mixed. As the planets move through the zodiac signs and houses, and form aspects to each other, the absolute morality embodied in each planet varies. Morality therefore alters with time, place and motion. Plato had hinted as much in the Republic:

Not only for plants that grow from the earth but also for animals that live upon it there is a cycle of bearing and barrenness for soul and body as often as the revolutions of their orbs come full circle, in brief courses for the short-lived and oppositely for the opposite; but the laws of pros-

perous birth of infertility for your race, the men you have bred to be your rulers will not for all their wisdom ascertain by reasoning combined with sensation, but they will escape them, and there will be a time when they will beget children out of season. Now for divine begettings there is a period comprehended by a perfect number (Plato, 1935: VIII, 546 A-B).

Plato's most significant contribution to the question of astronomy and morality was his theory of soul. As set out in *Phaedrus* the human being consisted of four different parts, the body and three-part soul. The highest part, the rational soul, mind or intellect, discerns what is true, judges what is real, makes rational decisions, is related to the movement of the celestial spheres, and can contact the divine:

Now the divine intelligence, since it is nurtured on mind and pure knowledge, and the intelligence of every soul which is capable of receiving that which befits it, rejoices in seeing reality for a space of time and by gazing upon truth is nourished and made happy until the revolution brings it again to the same place (Plato, 1914: 246 A-D; see also 253 C-D).

Of the other two parts, the 'spirited' soul carries out what reason has decided and the 'appetitive soul' is the seat of emotion or desire. In his well-known analogy Plato describes a chariot pulled by two horses, the charioteer being the rational soul and the two horses the two irrational parts (Plato, 1914: 246 A-D). Plato's scheme of the tripartite soul was codified in the *Corpus Hermeticum*, composed in Hellenistic Egypt from the second-century BCE onwards, in which it was asserted that there are two ways to be freed from planetary fate. That is, astronomical theory requires action. The first way is for the soul to ascend through the planetary spheres, shedding its negative psychological characteristics as it does so (Scott, 1982: Vol. 1, 129, Libellus I.25; see also Bloomfield, 1941). As the soul passes the moon it sheds growth and decay, Mercury trickery, Venus deceit, the sun arrogance, Mars daring and recklessness, Jupiter greed and Saturn falsehood. At the eighth sphere, that of the stars, the soul begins to praise God, encouraged by the sound of voices from the higher levels. Finally the soul ascends to God and, in the logical climax of Platonic theology, it is reunited with God. The second way is to make as direct and spontaneous connection with the light of God, asserting the rational soul's inherent freedom from planetary fate. In this model, as the planets move, they stir up the negative and malefic qualities described by Ptolemy, potentially causing ill-fortune

or immoral behaviour, all of which can be neutralised by the spontaneous contact with the divine light:

the planets replace one another from moment to moment; they do not go on working without change, but succeed one another in rotation. These daemons then make their way through the body, and enter the two irrational parts of the soul; and each daemon perverts the soul in a different way, according to his special mode of action. But the rational part of the soul remains free from the dominion of the daemons, and fit to receive God in itself. If then the rational part of a man's soul is illumined by a ray of light from God, for that [in] man the working of the daemons is brought to nought; for no daemon and no god has power against a single ray of the light of God (Libellus XVI. 15-16 in Scott, 1982).

In one dialogue *Poimandres*, speaking to Hermes, declares, look 'at what you yourself have in you; for in you too, the word is son, and the mind is father of the word...Now fix your thought upon the Light...and learn to know it' (Libellus I. 6, in Scott, 1982: Vol. 1, 117). Later the statement is made that 'He who has recognised himself [acknowledged the divinity within] enters into the Good' (Libellus I.18, in Scott, 1982: Vol. 1). The need to free one's self from the morally-threatening qualities of the planetary personalities became more pressing with the development of Gnostic theology in the early centuries CE, in which the cosmos was envisaged as a kind of prison. In Gnosticism's cosmophobic (Jonas, 1963) theology, the physical universe inhabited by humanity was created by the evil god Yaldabaoth ('The Apocryphon of John', x-xi, pp. 110-11, Robinson, 1988):

And he [Yaldabaoth] placed seven kings - each corresponding to the firmaments of heaven - over the seven heavens, and five over the depths of the abyss, that they may reign. And he shared his fire with them, but he did not send forth from the power of the light which he had taken from his mother, for he is ignorant darkness.

Developing the model already set out in the *Corpus Hermeticum* salvation is then possible through Christ, bi-passing the astronomical universe:

Live with Christ, and he will save you. For he is the true light and the sun of life. For just as the sun which is visible and makes light for the eyes of the flesh, so Christ illuminates every

mind and the heart...the light of Christ, which is reason...For everything which is visible is a copy of that which is hidden. For as a fire which burns in a place without being confined to it, so it is with the sun which is in the sky, all of whose rays extend to places on the earth. Similarly, Christ has a single being, and he gives light to every place. This is also the way in which he speaks of our mind, as if it were a lamp which burns up the place. (Being) in a part of the soul, it gives light to all the parts ('The Teachings of Silvanus', 96-98, in Robinson, 1988).

The liberation of the soul from the physical cosmos is facilitated by Christ himself who, at his ascension to Heaven, travelled through the planetary spheres, destroying their malign power:

It came to pass then, when I saw the mystery of all these words in the vesture which was sent me, that straightway I clothed myself therewith, and I shone most exceedingly and soared into the height. He entereth the firmament. 'I came before the [first] gate of the firmament, shining most exceedingly, and there was no measure for the light which was about me, and the gates of the firmament were shaken one over against another and all opened at once. The powers of the firmament are amazed and fall down and adore him.' And all rulers and all authorities and all angels therein were thrown all together into agitation because of the great light which was on me. And they gazed at the radiant vesture of light with which I was clad, and they saw the mystery which contains their names, and they feared most exceedingly. And all their bonds with which they were bound, were unloosed and every one left his order, and they all fell down before me, adored and said: 'How hath the lord of the universe passed through us without our knowing?' And they all sang praises together to the interiors of the interiors; but me they saw not, but they saw only the light. And they were in great fear and were exceedingly agitated and sang praises to the interiors of the interiors (Mead, 1984: 'Pistis Sophia' I.11; see also Lieven, 2002).

3. THE MEDIEVAL WORLD

The strand of cosmological thought passing from Plato to the *Corpus Hermeticum* and Gnostic Christianity, and taking in Claudius Ptolemy clearly identified a threat to individual fortune, behaviour and morality emerging from the planets' positions at

birth as well as the disruptive effects of their daily motions. However, Ptolemaic astrology, Hermetic texts and Gnostic scriptures all but disappeared in Latin Europe following the disintegration of the Western Empire at the end of the fifth-century. The problem of planetary fate then remained dormant for eight hundred years until the translation of a large corpus of astrological material into Latin in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, largely from Arabic, but including many Greek originals of which the *Tetrabiblos* was the most important. The threat to the individual moral choice required by Christianity was clear from Ptolemy's delineation of the planets' role in the formulation of personality and behaviour. In the context of medieval Christianity it was entirely unacceptable for one's chances of salvation through Christ to be limited by the planets location at one's birth and their subsequent transits. This was offensive both to scripture and to the role of the Church and priesthood: how could a priest offer absolution if the planets had already denied it? The issue was resolved by the Dominican Friar Albertus Magnus (1200-80) who claimed that the planets could influence the body directly, but not the soul (Hendrix 2016). The solution was then set out in much greater detail by Albertus's student, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), although he was unable to access Plato's *Republic* or *Phaedrus* and the great part of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and none of the Gnostic scriptures. However, he reached a similar conclusion, namely that the soul (which we may see as equivalent to Plato's rational soul), was free from direct planetary influence (similar to the rational soul in the *Corpus Hermeticum*), by relying on the interpretation of part of the rational soul in Aristotelian thought (Aristotle, 1936, III.V) as the 'Active Intellect'. Thomas considered that the 'Active Intellect' was equivalent to the Christian soul, and if the soul was therefore free from planetary influence, this could only be exerted via the body:

Of course acts of choice and movements of the will are controlled by God. And human intellectual knowledge is ordered by God through the mediation of the angels. Whereas matters pertinent to bodily things, whether they are internal or external, when they come within the use of man, are governed by God by means of the angels and the celestial bodies (Aquinas, 1975: III.91.2).

Thomas added (1975: III.92.2): 'man is ordered in regard to his body under the celestial bodies, in regard to his intellect under the angels, and in regard to his will under God'. This formula actually provided an explanation for why astrological prediction

might work in general circumstances but not specific ones:

That astrologers not unfrequently forecast the truth by observing the stars may be explained in two ways. First, because a great number of men follow their bodily passions, so that their actions are for the most part disposed in accordance with the inclination of the heavenly bodies: while there are few, namely, the wise alone, who moderate these inclinations by their reason (Aquinas, 1920: 2.2.95.5)

Engagement with the celestial bodies had direct and powerful consequences for moral – or immoral – behaviour. According to Thomas' model the individual's chances of salvation were therefore dependent on resisting the planets' direct influence on the body, promoting baser desires. The Soul Drama was therefore as intense as it was in the Greek world but the Soul Journey was, as in one version described in the *Corpus Hermeticum* and the Gnostic scriptures, directly to God rather than via the planetary spheres.

4. THE MODERN WORLD

If we move forward to the modern world then we can observe how scientific astronomy has abandoned the concept of the Soul Journey, yet still has implications for ethical and moral behaviour. A key example is the influence of Newton's theory of universal law on the argument that, as the universe is governed by one set of laws, so is society, which is contained within the universe (Campion, 2016). Further, every individual is subject to the same law and therefore has equal rights. Newtonianism, the philosophy derived from Newton's work, did not originate human rights theory, but it did contribute the claim that human rights are justified by the laws of physics. Freedom is then the default position of the Newtonian universe and natural rights belong to people through the fact of the existence of the laws of gravity and planetary motion (Paine, 2013). What passes for ethical in one period, though, is not neces-

sarily accepted in another. For example, John Herschel's activities in South Africa from 1833–8 were largely motivated by his belief (along with many other progressive thinkers of the time) that rational progress in science – including astronomy – and imperialism went hand in hand (Musselman, 1998). Setting a wider context, Musselman stated that 'Astronomy has long been recognised as a tool of empire' (Musselman, 1998), referring mainly to those navigational aspects of the discipline which had enabled European explorers to traverse the globe and encounter new territories for conquest and colonisation. More recent influences of astronomy on culture have helped fuel claims that western rationalism may not be superior to the world views of other cultures. Einstein is held particularly responsible for these ideas (Isaacson and Schucking, 2007; Johnson, 1991) as a result of popular equations between scientific relativity on the one hand, and controversial theories of moral and cultural relativism (the idea that no one culture is superior or inferior to another) on the other. The cultural consequences of all three examples, Newton, Herschel and Einstein, are felt in political action: Newtonian natural rights theory encouraged the American revolutionaries of 1776; Herschel was representative of those who wished to civilise colonised peoples by spreading Western values; Einstein has unintentionally encouraged the advocates of cultural relativity and multiculturalism.

5. CONCLUSION

To conclude, while astronomical theory has a constant influence on culture, there appears to be a clear difference between ancient and premodern ideas on the one hand, and modern astronomy on the other. In the former, the entire sky was inherently moral, a notion embodied in theories of the seven deadly sins, the Soul Drama and the Soul Journey. The consequence was that action was necessary in order to navigate the cosmos's moral structure. By contrast modern scientific astronomical theory has no essential moral components, yet influences moral and ethical ideas in wider culture, and consequent action.

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